



THE NATIONAL HERALD

# Yvette Manassis Corporon pens *When the Cypress Whispers*

SATURDAY, JANUARY 4, 2014 | By Sirigos - Dean



NEW YORK – The Greek American experience is about pursuing and realizing dreams, or facilitating them for others – especially one’s children. Tasos Manassis is one of the community’s top restaurateurs, but he once had another dream. His daughter Yvette Manassis Corporon is senior producer of the entertainment news show Extra.

The Emmy award on her mantle marks her a success, but she too had another dream, which is about to burst onto bloom. Her first novel, *When the Cypress Whispers*, will be published this spring. It tells the story of Daphne, the daughter of Greek immigrants, and what she learned from her beloved Yiayia.

It is also a story of true heroism and philanthropy: the sacrifices and even greater risks undertaken by the people of Erikousa during WWII to save a family. Tasos Manassis was born on the little island of Erikousa off the northern tip of Corfu in the Adriatic Sea. He moved to Athens when he was 10 and to the United

States when he was 15. He attended Theodore Roosevelt High School in the Bronx, earned his BA at NYU and took graduate courses at Columbia.

Corporon assumed he studied business at Columbia, but his initial dream was to be a filmmaker. "I gave myself five years and when I did not accomplish it in five years, I went back to my father's restaurant business," he said.

Their restaurant, near UN headquarters at was the favorite dining spot of Manhattan's diplomats, and it was aptly named The Delegate. His son Manoli continues in the family business.

But it was not a case of practicality permanently triumphing over art. He didn't ignore his artistic genes, he cultivated them in his daughter – along with her love of Greece.

She laughed as she said "Growing up it was all about Parelasi [Manassis is active in the Greek parade on Fifth Avenue], church, GOYA. He was very involved in the community and the church and he drilled into us the importance of our culture and heritage."

She attended Greek school, but her love of Greece was not nurtured there. When asked how often she visited Greece, she said "When I was younger, not every year, but beginning at 15, when I had any say in it, every summer, I went to Greece." Kerkyra and Erikousa are her favorites, but she also loves Santorini.

As a child she did a lot of reading, encouraged by her father and her mother, Vasiliki, who is from near Nafpaktos.

Corporon is also a runner, but asked if her father supplied the athletic genes she said "Dad's sport was reading the New York Times and watching CNN." That too must have inspired her. Following him to NYU she majored in journalism, as well as classical civilization.

She had a powerful summer studying journalism in Israel, where she witnessed the first intifada. The situation was volatile, so she did not wear her American passport on her sleeve. "They would ask me 'what are you?' she said, and she told Arab and Israeli alike that she was Greek. Both groups would then excitedly say "you're one of us...come with us."

Seeds were also planted when she visited the holocaust museum at Yad Vashem.

When she returned to NYU, weather man Nick Gregory helped her get an internship at Fox News, and she was offered a fulltime job after three months while still a student.

The book was born out her work at Extra interviewing people – along with her other Greek colleague Maria Menounos – who have accomplished their dreams. “It’s wonderful, but I looked at them and thought ‘I want to do mine too, and I finally realized writing a novel was mine.’”

She followed the rule of “writing what you know,” which for her was Greek history. “I remembered a story my Yiayia would tell me about her life on Erikousa during WWII when her husband was in New York,” she said. “There was a Jewish family hiding from the Germans and the whole island helped them and kept the secret of the father, Savvas, two daughters and a granddaughter.”

Savas was a tailor on Corfu. Two days after allies landed at Normandy, signaling the nazi’s doom, the occupation authorities moved to round up the island’s 2000 Jews. Most perished in Auschwitz but the book is about some of the 200 who escaped.

Savas was her family’s tailor, so he knew he would be welcome in Erikousa, and he and his family was hidden in the priest’s house.

“The Germans said ‘we will kill you all’” if they found the islanders were hiding Jews,” Corporon said, “but the whole island worked together and kept the secret and saved the family...Even the people who were opposed to helping the Jews at the risk of Germans reprisals helped and kept the secret. It’s a great story and deserves recognition.”

That is the basis of what Corporon calls a fictionalized account of what happened during the Nazi occupation. Manassis’ second cousin, Dr. Spyros Orfanos, noted clinical and academic psychologist in New York, “was instrumental in helping me fill in the blanks in the story of what happened,” she said.

She always had the story in her head and thought “this is an amazing story and nobody knows about it.”

As is usually the case with human triumphs, she was well-prepared to act on the dream, having studied WWII, and read books like *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

She began the project about six years ago and the first draft took 1½ years. “And as everyone will tell you, good books are not written, they are revised, and revised,” she said. She found an agent – which is vital – who loved the story, and Harper Collins loved it and bought it.”

The agent, Nena Madonia, is Sicilian “so she gets us,” Corporon told TNH. She then found her ideal editor, Claire Wachtel, who said “I want this book.”

Although she had previously published a book with advice for working moms, she had never written fiction in any form. “The novel was the dream.”

Asked when she told her father about the project, she said “I don’t think I did. I’m not one who talks a lot. I just hunker down and do it, and when it was done I just said ‘hey, guess what I wrote a book...guess what, I sold it...guess what, it’s selling around the world.’”

There is talk of making the book into a movie, and she is working on another book, but as busy as she is – the day job at Extra continues – “I am enjoying the moment. I never expected it to be this well-received.” It is being translated into 10 languages, which is unusual, and she is very excited it is also coming out in Greek.

Corporon grew up – and Manassis still lives – in New Rochelle. Her two children, Christiana (12) and Niko (10), were baptized, as she was, at the Church of the Holy Trinity. “They are smart and precocious. Niko is a hockey player and team captain and Christiana plays softball.” So there is plenty of scope for more dreaming.

(Harper; \$25.99; Hardcover; ISBN: 9780062267580; on-sale: 4/1/2014).